

DECAY TOURISM

The freak shows of Coney Island, the markets of Old Damascus, The Twelve Apostles of Australia and the Lenin statues of the 'last dictatorship in Europe'... Catch these threatened landmarks while you still can.

Illustrations by Wayne Lacrosse

Travelling by subway from Manhattan to Coney Island, I can't help but think that I've landed in a whole other galaxy. Shitty row housing, boring flats and train stations covered by weeds and graffiti determine the face of Brooklyn before we reach our final destination at the Atlantic Ocean. This route has been in use for over a century. Even in the early 1900s, New York commuters came to Coney Island to escape the busy city life. On the weekends, hundreds of thousands took to the beaches, queued for a hotdog at Nathan's Famous, danced the night away and enjoyed the sickening turns and twists of the many high-tech fairground rides Coney Island was famous for. The amusement culture was born and raised right here. Young Americans were sick and tired of the prude Victorian Age with its strict rules of conduct. Coney Island was their way of saying 'fuck you' to the past. Corsages made way for bathing suits and disfigured people were no longer hidden in cellars, but loudly displayed in infamous freak shows. Dark rides contained macabre disaster spectacles and science fiction. Coney Island equalled kitsch, unrestrained youth and godless fun.

Leaving the subway, Cyclone appears to your left. It's one of the main inheritances from Coney Island's Golden Age. This wooden roller coaster was built in 1927 and is still in operation today. Its run-down entry has a staggeringly obese man sitting on a wobbly folding chair. He operates the coaster's brakes. By hand. If that doesn't scare you, eight dollars gets you a seat on the train.

A ride on Cyclone may be the best way to recapture some of the excitement from the old days. The roller coaster's height and speed may not be very impressive compared to the constructions in modern theme parks, but the way old Cyclone rattles visitors along its course is breathtaking. I cannot recall a more intense roller coaster than this one—and I've ridden quite a few in my time. Returning to the station, some local youngsters jump on the still rolling train, trying to convince dizzy visitors to re-ride. Against a discount, of course.

The fact that Cyclone is still standing today could be considered a small miracle. During the late 1940s, Coney Island began its descent into obscurity. One by one, the big theme parks were destroyed by fire and there was no money to rebuild them. Attendance figures dropped as

Coney Island and the death of living relics

By Mike Peek



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television and other new forms of amusement claimed the public's attention. The people's playground became a criminal paradise, a ghost town. Provisional measures have since ended the dark era, of particularly the 1970s, but Coney Island still breathes decay and memories of times long gone. And while nice summer days once again attract a decent number of visitors to the beaches and amusement rides, there never was a clear vision of what should happen to the place.

That's not a bad thing, though. In fact, for overly nostalgic people like myself, Coney Island might be the closest thing to heaven. Seeing and experiencing the few remaining landmarks, like Cyclone and the Wonder Wheel, is like walking through history. The cosy, one-room Coney Island Museum (admission: \$0.99) continues in that spirit. No interactive crap here, just a collection of faded photographs and damaged roller coaster cars exhibited in the least sexy way possible. There are still freak shows, too. If you need to let off steam, you can shoot a freak in the face with a paint bomb. Disappointingly, today's freak appears to be an ordinary, bored kid from Brooklyn with a nasty side job. But that doesn't stop some German tourists from colouring the poor guy yellow from the eyebrows down.

If you want to call that kind of amusement gritty, it's gritty in the most harmless way. Still, New York wants to clean Coney Island up like they did with Times Square in the 1970s. They have already sold most of the land to a local developer, who plans to build five-star hotels, casinos and chain stores on the site. While Cyclone and the Wonder Wheel will be preserved, many locals nonetheless feel their homes will be taken away from them and that the Bohemian spirit will disappear as the crowds change. That in the process of the rich taking over Coney Island, much of its history and unique appeal will disappear. And these residents are probably right, of course. Neat paint jobs, ultra modern façades and Disney stores are tough to reconcile with the current mood. Coney Island is one of the few remaining sites in New York that hasn't been standardised to a safe, clean amusement for tourists only. It's a rare place in the metropolis where history meets present and locals meet visitors. I, for one, would like it to stay that way.

While nostalgia is certainly a big part of its appeal, it wouldn't be fair to call Coney Island a dead relic. The latest attraction is a simulation of 'water boarding', a torturing practice often used in Guantánamo Bay. For a dollar you get to see two animatronics demonstrating how the victim feels he is drowning, breaking his will to resist talking. It's a political statement of course, and one that fits well in Coney Island's history of bizarre rides. It might not be tasteful, but it's daring. On or over the edge. And exemplary of a spirit New York can't afford to lose.

Say g'day to the last standing Apostles of the Great Ocean Road

By Matthew Curlewis



The (former) Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus

By Marlous Veldt



Australia. You've probably heard about it. The land Down Under. The driest (inhabited) continent on the planet. The place with the mixed-up animal species like platypuses: mammals that lay eggs *and* are venomous *and* have webbed feet. It also contains some of the oldest geological formations on the planet, so be careful how loudly you shout 'G'day'—the echoes you generate might endanger a site or two of renowned international interest.

Near Tasmania (that little island at the bottom, almost twice the size of the Netherlands) and a few hours west of Melbourne, is one such famous and spectacular site. The Great Ocean Road is around 250 kilometres worth of rugged coastline that was originally built in the late 1920s by returned servicemen as a memorial to their comrades who died in combat in WWI. The road now passes through a number of scenic small towns and boasts a few internationally famous attractions. One is Bells Beach, the very stuff of surfing legends, that was immortalised in the Keanu Reeves 'classic', *Point Break* (even though budgetary restrictions led to Oregon USA's Cannon Beach standing in as body double). Another is a series of natural rock formations known as The Twelve Apostles. Or Eleven, or Ten And A Half...

The Apostles are a series of limestone

stacks, rising as high as 50 metres out of the pounding surf, which have taken shape after years of wind and wave erosion eating away at the coastline. Lately, however, that geological erosion has become more ravenous. Although romantically called the 'Twelve' Apostles, only nine rock towers were actually ever visible above the water's surface. That was until the winter of 2005, when one 45-metre-high tower gave a great sigh and collapsed, reducing the number to eight—

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and this only 15 years on the heels of another big sigh. In 1990, a nearby limestone formation called London Bridge also decided to relieve itself of its dependence on the Australian mainland, in the process leaving two (presumably slightly startled) tourists stranded on the newly-formed small island, until their subsequent rescue by a helicopter.

In some shoebox somewhere I have a snap I shot of the entire London Bridge in 1985. This coastline was a staggeringly beautiful, wild, rugged place. In 2005 I made a return visit to find a kinder, gentler, yet slightly decayed place, now resplendent with walkways and scenic points and helpful 'Take Picture Here' idiot signs. The Pope just visited Australia. Who knows, another Apostle could be set to leave the faith any minute now. Run, don't walk, and keep a helicopter rescue number handy to experience The Great Ocean Road.

For 14 years, President Lukashenko—aka 'the last dictator in Europe'—has kept the people of Belarus happy by running the country as if the Soviet Union was still alive. Visiting it is like stepping into a 1970s James Bond film, complete with collective farms, Lenin streets and statues, and a KGB that never changed its name (or practice).

But Lukashenko's model lifestyle is dated and taking its toll on the national budget. So he's turning to Russian businessmen to help him out. If you want to see what a functioning Soviet Union looked like before the mafia took over, better head to Minsk before it's a glare of neon signs and limo parking.

Every Soviet capital needs a street for parades and flag waving and Minsk has a particularly impressive one: Independence Avenue. The uniform but elegant Stalinist architecture perfectly expresses that Soviet vision of a clean and sunny society, where everybody is part of 'the greater good'. And while Lenin Square is now officially Independence Square, a ten-metre statue of its former namesake still welcomes visitors to the central administrative building.

On Lenin Street, the National Art Museum houses a floor of 'non-social realist' Soviet paintings. Instead of rose-cheeked soldiers and happy farm girls, these are emotional depictions of the culturally diverse city Minsk once was and the harsh

years of WWII when German and Russian troops fought their battles in its countryside. There's even a lovely portrait of a factory worker who broke production records in 1982.

Also interesting is the Great Patriotic War Museum on October Square. Five floors of military bravado leave you with very warm feelings towards the Russian liberators and a lot of anger against the German aggressors. The propaganda is translated into grandiose visual displays

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and although there is a lot to be said for impartial history telling, it will be sad when this artistic version disappears completely.

A very much alive artefact is the KGB, centrally located in a pink building near McDonald's (a relic

from the post-Soviet years when Lukashenko was not in power). Even without signs, any resident can tell you what the building is and what happens when suspected critics of Lukashenko's regime are called in for a chat.

The most breathtaking monument of Soviet power is on Victory Square. A pedestal holding up a star in laurels—even higher than the Lenin statue—commemorates the defeat of Nazi Germany and the reinstallation of Soviet rule in Belarus for the next 50 years.

It looks like it's finally all crumbling to an Eastern end, however, as the leader emerges shinier, richer and more shameless about his intentions.